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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH AFRO-COLOMBIAN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP
AFRODES

REF: BOGOTA 0032

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) On January 17, Polcouns and Poloff visited the Bogota offices of the Association for Internally Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES) to discuss specific threats against AFRODES' office in Cartagena, as well as land, displacement, and general security issues facing Afro-Colombians. AFRODES President Geiler Romana appreciated Embassy efforts to obtain additional GOC security for the Cartagena office. He said AFRODES was satisfied with land titling under Law 70 of 1993 in the Pacific Coast Departments; the main threat to Afro-Colombian lands in this region is the lack of public order. Romana claimed the GOC's census methodology was flawed, estimating the Afro-Colombian population to be 25 percent of Colombia's total population as opposed to the 10 percent found in the 2005 census. End Summary.

SECURITY ISSUES

12. (SBU) In response to a letter to the Ambassador from several U.S.-based human rights groups, we met with AFRODES President Geiler Romana to discuss threats against the group's Cartagena office. The meeting followed Embassy outreach to the Vice President's Office for Human Rights and the Ministry of Interior and Justice' (MOIJ) Protection Program to obtain more security for the office. Romana thanked the Embassy for its efforts to enhance protection of the Cartagena office. He said pamphlets were distributed in a low-income Cartagena neighborhood in December 2006, identifying AFRODES as a "military target." Romana had met with officials from the Vice President's Office for Human Rights and the MOIJ protection program to discuss these threats. The GOC had offered to conduct a risk assessment of the Cartagena office to determine if it should receive protection measures. Although AFRODES' Bogota office and national directors receive GOC protection measures, Romana feared this assessment would result in an "ordinary" to "low" risk finding, as it had in the past for AFRODES' regional offices/personnel. We promised to remain engaged with the GOC.

13. (SBU) Romana said Afro-Colombians--and human rights groups defending their interests--continue to suffer violence and threats throughout Colombia. He said approximately 30 percent of all Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Colombia are of Afro descent; UNHCR puts this number at 25 percent. Some 35 percent of the population of Choco's capital Quibdo are Afro-Colombian IDPs. In addition to the

Cartagena threats, Romana said AFRODES personnel were reluctant to visit Afro-Colombian IDPs in Soacha, south Bogota, due to a "large" former paramilitary presence. Given these dangers, he suggested the GOC designate a seat for an Afro-Colombian IDP on its inter-agency and inter-institutional Committee on Risk Regulation and Evaluation (CRER). He said there is no Afro-Colombian representative on the CRER.

LAND ISSUES

¶4. (U) Romana said the GOC has collectively titled 5.2 million hectares of land in Choco and the other Pacific Coast departments for Afro-Colombian communities under Law 70 of ¶1993. Only a small portion of land remains to be titled in this region. The main threat to Afro-Colombian lands in the Pacific Coast is the lack of public order, not legal title. He explained that land titling in Choco was effective because the GOC had previously designated this territory as federal land reserves. In contrast, Romana said future collective titling, especially in urban centers, on the Caribbean coast and on the Eastern plains, would be problematic as the Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural (INCODER) would have to purchase land in order to grant titles to Afro-Colombian communities.

¶5. (SBU) He also expressed concern that a new, comprehensive, rural development bill under consideration in the Colombian Congress (reftel) might undercut the protections provided Afro-Colombian lands under Law 70, explaining that such protections did not enjoy constitutional status. (Note: The current version of the bill explicitly states that it does

not modify any provisions of Law 70.)

AFRODES: CENSUS PROCESS IS FLAWED

¶6. (SBU) Romana said the census process was flawed, arguing that the Afro-Colombian population accounts for 25 percent of Colombia's total population rather than the roughly 10 percent found in the 2005 census. Romana attributed the undercount to discrepancies between how Colombians of Afro descent identify themselves in practice and the description of "Afro-Colombian" under the census, as well as a weak sense of ethnic identity in general among Afro-Colombians. He complained the GOC has not been receptive to proposals to revise the census form to alleviate this problem.

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